

Jewellery

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Jewellers want feds
to get the lead out

Can unified branding
boost gemstone sales?

Custom design
holds its own even
in tough times

Essential Summer Show Guide

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Custom engraving can personalize a piece of jewellery. Care should be taken not to make the design too elaborate to maintain legibility. Photo courtesy Mirko Engraving Ltd.

can be melted down and used to create the new design, and mismatched or lower-quality stones can be traded in toward the cost of new ones. Starting from scratch, notes Myerson, also doesn't take as big a bite out of consumers' wallets as it used to. Modern manufacturing techniques have brought down the cost of custom-designed jewellery to a price range that is not a turnoff for consumers.

"The process is also very fast right now," says Myerson. "A retailer has access to almost everything and anything. People almost want instant gratification, so the turnaround time for producing a sketch and estimate is usually two or three days for us."

A guiding hand

Generally speaking, jewellery is seen as a status symbol, but even more so when it is custom made. Like a finely tailored suit made to order, jewellery designed according to a customer's specification holds higher value for its wearer. He or she is part of the process, developing a look based on individual taste and fashion trends, as well as something that fits in with their lifestyle. Plug the word 'jewellery' into a search engine and access to millions of designs is instantaneous. The consumer becomes the jewellery designer, but should they?

Spivak notes her clients often turn to jewellery in the showroom for inspiration, pointing to a particular setting or stone cut they'd like to see in their own piece. Doing so also helps the client get his or her meaning across to the designer.

While a collaborative process, creating a successful custom design is not only dependent on being able to interpret what the client is looking for; it also comes down to steering them in a different direction when the design is unsound or will not stand up to daily

wear. Given the time and effort that goes into a custom piece, this is one of the few cases where the customer is not always right, especially when it comes to maintaining design integrity, van Mil notes.

"You can't be intimidated by the customer," he explains. "If anything, it has to be the other way around. The customer is not a jewellery designer. He or she has no idea how what they're saying or describing is going to impact what will end up on their finger. Really good custom designers manage to get a sense of what the customer is after and make it into something that works. The bad ones listen to the customer and end up with something that doesn't look good and doesn't hold up."

Mirosław Kruszynski of Mirko Engraving Ltd., in Toronto agrees, particularly when it comes to engraving. He says he often tones down a design so that the elements are clear and distinct. Elaborate engraving may look good on paper, he notes, but that may not be the case once it's on the jewellery. Also, consumers and designers alike often overlook the fact engraving is significantly smaller on the actual piece. His advice is to create a design without too many small elements and to keep it simple.

"Sometimes they create such a busy design with flowers and other elements that in the end won't look good or cannot be engraved at all," says Kruszynski, a master engraver who does custom work for retailers. "Or if I were to engrave all the elements, the cost would be in the thousands of dollars. We have to provide the customer with a design that fits to his or her budget and will be legible."

The biggest drawback to custom design is not getting it right the first time, says van Mil, pointing to poor communication as the culprit. Whether the designer or goldsmith is in-house or the job is sourced out to a trade shop, constant communication is key to creating a finished product with which the customer will be happy. E-mailing computer-aided design (CAD) renderings is a quick way to share ideas with clients, allowing them to approve or further tweak them remotely. Creating a wax carving also provides the client with a sense of dimension that a rendering does not. "The profit margins are not so that you can redo a custom design two or three times," van Mil warns.

A happy customer is the end goal, but sometimes that's not necessarily the result. Even with extensive consultation and approvals, there is always a chance the client is not pleased with the finished piece. Spivak says her customers are rarely disappointed, but when it does happen, the store keeps the piece and adds it to its inventory. Depending on whether they have an established relationship with the client, a deposit may not be required. However, if one is taken, Spivak says it is returned to the customer.

"We involve the customer in the step-by-step process of the custom design," she says. "We do this because we know they enjoy seeing the different stages involved in creating custom pieces of jewellery. We also do this to avoid any confusion about what the piece will look like when it's finished. They see the piece gradually come to life in each stage and the end result 99 per cent of the time is a big smile." ♦